



Contemporary World as a Massive Design Failure A Way Out?

Acosta García, Nicolás

Published in:
Journal of Extreme Anthropology

DOI:
[10.5617/jea.6932](https://doi.org/10.5617/jea.6932)

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
[Unspecified](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Acosta García, N. (2019). Contemporary World as a Massive Design Failure: A Way Out? *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, 3(1), 174-177. <https://doi.org/10.5617/jea.6932>

Book Review

Contemporary World as a Massive Design Failure: A Way Out?

Nicolás Acosta García
University of Copenhagen

Book Review of Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.



Arturo Escobar is an anthropologist and theorist widely known for his contribution to delineating development as an ideology (1995), and his exploration of ethnic-social movements in the context of neoliberal globalization (2008). His recent work on political ecology and the ontological turn has been leading towards a lengthier discussion on the role of design and technology in the context of the current environmental and social crises. His point of departure in *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of Worlds* is that the contemporary world is a massive design failure (2018, 32). This begs the questions: how did we get there and how can we move forward? Escobar's answer is that 'business as usual' approaches can at best reduce the levels of unsustainability, but they are not real paths. In *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Escobar reviews the most salient trends and proposals in design studies focusing on

scholars that pay attention to place, environment, experience, politics, and digital technologies. Scholars working on design theory, STS, and studies in social movements and resistance in Latin America will find this book very useful.

Taking Ezio Manzini's definition of design as 'a culture and a practice concerning how things ought to be in order to attain desired functions and meanings' (Manzini 2015, 13) as his starting point, Escobar searches for ways in which design can be reoriented from its market dependence towards a 'mutually enhancing manner with earth' (2018, xvii). Escobar is not *only* offering a critique on design, but also of the context in which it takes



DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jea.6932>
Journal of Extreme Anthropology; 2019, 3(1): 174-177, 2535-3241

174



place: neoliberal globalization, individualism, patriarchy and colonialism. Writing against modernity as the dominant mode of life, Escobar argues that we need to step out from the boundaries of our current modes of social life and worldviews in order to bring about transitions. He is cognizant of the extent of this endeavor, as he writes: 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of modernity' (2018, 209).

Escobar centers his critique of development and modernity on his preoccupation with design's role in creating particular futures. To him, there is a choice between 'the matristic, convivial, futuring...re/creation of worlds based on the horizontal relation with all forms of life ... [and] the dream, held by the flashy techno-fathers of the moment, of a posthuman world wholly created by Man' (2018, 17). By revisiting unresolved questions in social theory, Escobar lays bare modernity's contradictions: 'is life better today than it has been for the human majorities' (2018, 19)? Signaling wicked problems, he asks, can modernity still offer solutions to modern problems? Or is modernity's ability to raise the questions needed to address current social and environmental crises 'fatally compromised'? Escobar recasts these questions by inviting us to look at the already viable alternatives currently existing under the principles of autonomy and sustainability.

The book's argument is laid out in three sections with two chapters in each section. In the first section, we are presented with the bases of design as a practice with its own historicity. In the second, design is approached from an ontological point of view, where Escobar argues that current design practices involve a dualist ontology of control and appropriation. As an alternative, he emphasizes a relational approach with all living beings. In the third section, Escobar provides an overview of two trends: design for transitions and design for autonomy.

The breadth of literature that Escobar covers is remarkable and offers a solid point of departure to delve into the field of critical design studies. Escobar reviews several subfields including design anthropology and anthropology of design, design in development studies, and decolonial design. Escobar aligns himself with the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, to argue for design as an embodied practice with effects upon our existential experience and for a shift towards creating 'new infrastructures of life' (2018, 40), which take design from its traditional practice linked to objects, technological change, individualism, market orientation and expert knowledge. He wants to bring attention to the way design articulates peoples' everyday lives with culture. In other words, the ways in which 'design designs' (2018, 110) our experience of reality and its articulation with forms of power. Hence, Escobar argues that a political ontology of design allows us to deal with unsustainability while supporting territorial-based social movements.

In his exploration of the political ontology of design in the second part of the book, Escobar points to the juncture between design, culture, and power, which in its current form has been occupied by a particular ontology. He deploys his ardent critique of the 'rationalistic tradition' (2018, 80-81) looking to dissect its relations. Escobar is at his best in his diagnosing of modernity's four core beliefs in: the individual, the real, science, and the economy. He aligns himself with subaltern peoples in order to argue that what is problematic with modernity's dualisms of human-civilized (European) vs. nonhuman-

uncivilized (the nonmodern) racialized peoples is ‘*the categorization and hierarchical classification of differences*’ (italics in the original text, 94) devaluing and suppressing those that do not conform to its precepts. It is important to note that Escobar does not himself completely avoid relying upon those same dualisms throughout as a rhetorical strategy to explain what his alternative to them is.

Escobar, in his first conceptual move, turns to ‘relationality’ both to dismiss dualisms and to bring forward his ontological design as an object-practice. He reminds us that ‘every tool or technology is ontological in the sense that ... it inaugurates a set of rituals, ways of doing, and modes of being’ (2018, 110). Hence, by changing the spaces of interactions, a designer can trigger changes in the orientation of the interrelations among user, tool and task. Escobar provides a review and a discussion of the discourses of transition by looking into the panoply of initiatives that are taking place in the Global North such as degrowth and the commons, and in the Global South, for example, post-development and *Buen Vivir*. He then presents the Transition Design Framework explaining that it seeks to foster societal transformation towards more sustainable futures.

The second conceptual move in the book comes in the third section with the deployment of the concept of ‘the pluriverse’. Based on the Zapatista movement’s motto of ‘a world where many worlds fit’ and building on a scholarly tradition of decolonial and postcolonial thinkers, Escobar uses the pluriverse to explain sociocultural worlds. The pluriverse serves as an entry point to ‘autonomous design,’ as a practice of social movements that strive for the defense of their territories. Escobar pays particular attention to the ability of certain social movements to ‘change traditions traditionally’ (2018, 172), that is to be in control of the way practices change. This design practice is oriented towards the strengthening of a community’s autonomy and its continued realization. Escobar’s discussion of autonomous design is one of the most compelling parts of the book as he presents the ethnographical experiences which inspired his theoretical framework.

The book concludes with a series of reflections on social theory concerning modernity, technology, the pluriverse and political ontology, both leaving open doors for further research and anticipating possible critique. The book is well written and convincingly argued. Some readers may find certain passages challenging and at times the argumentation becomes clearer upon a rereading. Throughout the book, Escobar’s repeated references to Buddhism left me wondering about the relation and importance of religion in articulating design practice. I am aware that he has explained the relation between Christianity and Afro-descendant cosmologies in Colombia’s Pacific (2008), and I hope in future work he explores more fully the connections between religion, design and development. In reading this book in relation to his previous work, some readers may have some difficulty connecting the dots in the beginning, especially those who are not experts in design theory; later on, it becomes much clearer that the text’s direction is towards the possibilities of the intersection between design, social movements and political ontology. Finally, the book provides a powerful conceptual framework, an impressive review of theory, as well as useful and intriguing case studies that I hope to explore further in the near future.

- Escobar, Arturo.** 1995. "Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World through Development." *The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/102.405.1>.
- . 2008. *Territories of Difference*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Manzini, Ezio.** 2015. *Design, When Everybody Designs. An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.